
The Role of Information Operations Campaigns in Shaping a Political Reality: The American Experience as an Example

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Editorial Abstract: This article won a US Army Information Operations Proponent (USAIOP) annual writing contest award in 2006. Major Talley examines the nature of contemporary information operations campaigns in Southwest Asia through the lens of the American Revolution. He describes how iconic works such as Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* display modern IO elements which helped successfully shape the eighteenth century influence battlespace.

“In 1815 John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson that, in his opinion, the Revolution had occurred not in the halls of Congress or on the battlefield, but rather in the “minds of the people.”¹

In both Afghanistan and Iraq, the United States finds itself fighting tenacious insurgencies. More precisely, the United States military, assisted by the forces from a multinational coalition, has found itself juggling many tasks, not least of which has been to shoulder the brunt of the fighting. While these herculean efforts have met with considerable success, the reality remains that these are only secondary efforts in both countries. The military's main effort, and the only means by which success will derive, lies in the performance of the Afghan and Iraqi forces, as well as in the demonstrated ability of either government to effectively govern. To that end, the United States military has sought to recruit, equip, train, and support tactical and operational employment of Afghan and Iraqi sovereign forces.

All that being said, it must be stressed that fighting the insurgency—whether by the United States' military, multinational allies, or even Afghan or Iraqi national forces—is NOT the core challenge. In both Afghanistan and Iraq, the core challenge is similar—to create both the institutions and political culture for a functioning and sustainable liberal democracy.²

In both instances, the insurgencies exist because they hold to a competing

vision of the post-war political reality. I define a political reality as the combination of ideals, values, and institutions that comprise and define a political system. To use the US as an example, its political reality—its ideals, values, and institutions—are defined by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. More so than anything else, this is a war of ideas—about which political, social, and economic systems are legitimate. The United States of America finds itself at war with an enemy that is better defined and understood by studying the ideology that motivates and inspires it than by any traditional analysis of the physical form that the enemy assumes. In such a war of ideas, the United States cannot afford to take a passive posture; we must deny ourselves any comfort we draw from our conviction that the combination of our political, social, and economic systems result in a greater opportunity for advancement, accumulation of wealth, and a higher quality of life for each individual. It bears repeating: this war is a struggle over legitimacy, not which combination of political, social, and economic systems offers the best cost-benefit ratio. If we are to win this war of ideas, we must commit to fighting it, and we must fight it aggressively.

Three Challenges Facing The US Military

The challenge for the US military is threefold. First, we must understand and accept the nature of the fight, and derive missions and roles accordingly. More precisely—accepting the premise that the core challenge is to create the

political culture and institutions in Afghanistan and Iraq that support liberal democracy—the military must define its role as fighting against one political vision and for another.

Regardless of the nature of the conflict, the US military would be most hesitant to undertake any role if it did not already possess a weapon system, or systems, suitable for the task. Indeed, the US military defines its roles less by the desired outcome than by what weapon systems it brings to bear, or by what forces it employs. The second challenge then is to determine what weapon systems the US military can field for such a role. Fortunately, it is within the discipline known as Information Operations that the US military possesses the ideal weapon system for such a role.

In our joint lexicon, we define IO as composed of five distinct disciplines,³ the purpose of whose events and actions is to “...influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own.” Regardless of where these events and actions occur, we define their effect as occurring in an information environment, defined as “...the aggregate of individuals, organizations, and systems that collect, process, disseminate, or act on information. The information environment is made up of three interrelated dimensions: physical, informational, and cognitive.”⁴

These definitions are almost mind-numbing in their complexity and lack of clarity. By default, any definition must be both inclusive and exclusive. Yet, who—or what—do either of these definitions exclude? The honest answer

is...nobody, and nothing! The problem this creates is that everything can be defined as an IO operation. Even worse, IO does not seem to have its own unique 'logic,' or purpose.

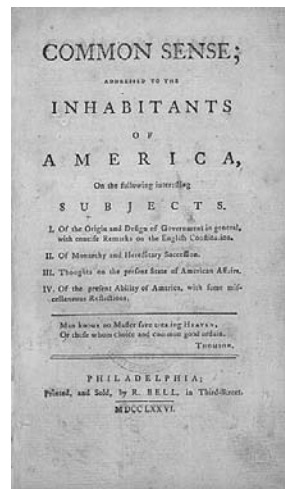
Why then do I argue that IO is the ideal weapon system for the current war? Let us accept that our current definitions only serve to confuse us. We must redefine IO in order to gain a better appreciation of what it is and what it can do for us. Strip away everything that IO says that it is, and ask one simple question: what is it about? Information Operations is about IDEAS! Consider again the definition of the information environment: people don't act on information—they act on how they interpret information. And interpretation is based upon ideas. Likewise, we would be better served by redefining IO to "...influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial ideas, and ideologies, while protecting our own." Once we begin to realize that it is the realm of ideas that we are fighting—and not the technology, the systems, nor even the individual messages that flash through the Internet in so many 0's and 1's—only then will we understand the unifying 'logic' of IO.

This new appreciation of IO—as the military's weapon system for the realm of ideas—prepares us to accept the third challenge: the US military must design an appropriate strategy or campaign plan, for employing its weapons systems in support of its role. Such a plan allows for synchronization and prioritization of efforts, all aimed at achieving quantifiable outcomes. Traditionally, the US military draws upon its historical experience for a comparable precedent, and builds its strategy from that template. But where does the military draw its precedents when the prevailing view of IO is that it is something 'new'?

I contend we can answer these questions through examination of the American experience from 1775-1788, when thirteen colonies found common cause in a set of shared ideals and values, and built a political culture and institutions around them. That American experience is comparable to the present challenge, and illustrative of how we may achieve a comparable result.

How an IO Campaign Can Serve as the Main Effort in Shaping Political Reality

The Declaration of Independence (1776) and Constitution of the United States (ratified in 1788) serve as the twin pillars of America's political reality. Within both of these documents we find the clearest expression of the ideals and values of the American people, and the clearest expression of American political culture. The Constitution goes one step further, laying out in clear detail the nature of the various political institutions and their proper relationship to one another. Looking back across the intervening centuries, it is easy to believe that such documents were inevitable. In fact, such a position could not be farther from the truth.



*The Common Sense template, 1776.
(US Library of Congress)*

In December of 1775, notwithstanding the fact that the Continental Congress had levied forces and revenue for a Continental Army, and that army had taken the field in a siege of British forces in Boston, the chances of the colonies waging a war for independence were practically nil. Indeed, just the month before, "In November 1775 the Congress voted in favor of a resolution to formally reaffirm the colonists' loyalty to the British crown." (Liell, 99) Yet within six months, the thirteen colonies would unanimously consent to a declaration of independence and commit unreservedly and wholeheartedly to a war that would

not be resolved for eight long years. What happened?

The answer is that within a span of less than five months, an information operations campaign had been successfully waged and decisively won. The American people forced their leaders to declare for independence because the people were convinced this was the only means by which they could establish the political culture and institutions that would guarantee their ideals and values. To a large degree, the story of this information operations campaign is the story of the pamphlet *Common Sense*, and to a lesser degree that of its author, Thomas Paine.

In a fascinating parallel, the Constitution of the United States likewise owes its birthright to the efforts of an information operations campaign: *The Federalist Papers*. Actually a series of eighty-five essays, published at short intervals over 1787-1788, *The Federalist Papers* encouraged support for ratification of the new Constitution. Though signed on September 17, 1787, it still required ratification by nine of the thirteen states to bring it into effect. This super-majority was viewed at the time as a near-insurmountable obstacle. The state most likely to be lost to the cause, and yet had to be won, was New York—whose Governor George Clinton was adamantly opposed ratification. Yet thanks in no small measure to the efforts of authors Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, New York did indeed ratify the Constitution, albeit by a very narrow margin.

An IO Campaign to Express Ideals and Values: *Common Sense* as a Template

Released on Tuesday, January 10, 1776, *Common Sense* "...was an immediate runaway hit, going on to sell 120,000 copies in its first three months." (Liell, 16) Indeed, by the end of the year there had been over 25 editions and "...over 500,000 copies—authorized and bootleg—in circulation; roughly one copy per every five inhabitants of America, or nearly one copy per household! Add to this astonishing

figure the fact that most copies were read to or by more than one person—in some cases many more—and the audience for *Common Sense* far surpasses any other printed work, apart from the Bible.” (Liell, 95)

Clearly, *Common Sense* was very uncommon. It falls to us to understand why. If we examine *Common Sense* as simply a best seller, we miss the point entirely. In his book, *46 Pages*, author Scott Liell comments “The single most important factor in that success was the unique genius of the pamphlet itself.” (Liell, 91) The genius of *Common Sense* is that it was something entirely new—it was an information operations campaign. This work spoke to the people, in the voice of the people, expressing both their mundane and the aspirational sentiments. That is, Paine didn’t just speak about what the people wanted their lives to be like, but also about what they wanted their lives to mean. *Common Sense* laid out the debate in stark terms. Paine redefined the debate, and in so doing he ruthlessly destroyed the ideological foundation of the opposing arguments. He made it personal—he named the king as enemy and he made the people feel personally affronted and involved. He made clear to all what was at stake—and why delay was worse than action. Most of all, he gave the people something to fight FOR that was greater than themselves and their current struggles—and he showed it could all be achieved. In the end, *Common Sense* did not lead the way—the people did; the book merely pointed the way.

Common Sense came “Into an atmosphere of uncertainty and doubt... like the revelation of an absolute truth. As Samuel Adams would say, the people acted as if they had been ‘awakened’ by *Common Sense*—they now felt that they knew what must be done in the face of the gathering crisis. Patience was not a quality much in favor. And it was only a matter of time before they began to turn their frustration with what they saw as a lack of progress toward independence onto their leaders in Congress.” (Liell, 107)

As one citizen wrote to his delegate, “The People are now ahead of you... The People’s blood is too Hot to admit of delays—All will be in confusion if independence is not declared immediately.” In the words of one constituent, the people were beginning to grumble: “What in the name of *Common Sense* are you gentlemen of the Continental Congress about?” (Liell, 107)

The work serves as an ideal template for an IO campaign, not only for the structure of its arguments, but also in relation to its audience. We’ll examine both of these aspects in turn.



18th century Information Operator
Thomas Paine. (Wikipedia)

The Structure Of An IO Campaign: Six Critical Elements

Common Sense provides us with six elements that must be incorporated into any IO campaign. First, you must define the debate; you can allow neither the enemy, nor even any interested third party, to define the terms of the struggle. Paine began by redefining the debate from one of civil rights to natural rights: those bestowed by the Creator. This destroyed the ideological foundation of those who opposed independence on the grounds of “...established government as the ultimate source of all rights, law, and justice.” (Liell, 63) This “...new perspective meant that instead of the colonists having to defend their rights, it

was Britain who had to defend its record of protecting and preserving those rights on behalf of its subjects.” (Liell, 74) Not only had Paine changed the relationship between government and the governed, from this point on, those who opposed independence were on the defensive.

In the preamble to the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson follows Paine in appealing “...to the timeless, universal authority of the ‘laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.’” In doing so, he too superseded virtually every legal argument that had been made against independence. (Liell, 137)

Previous efforts at gaining a consensus among the colonies failed because they sought to reckon with the political, economic, and cultural fragmentation that was the nature of colonial life; Paine simply ignored them. Recognizing the colonies would have to be united first, Paine “...largely ignored these regional divisions and distinctions” and “By combining the colonists’ diverse grievances into a single grievance and all potential policies into a single policy, he convinced his geographically dispersed readers that their interests were one and the same.” (Liell, 17)

Second, you must utterly destroy the enemy’s arguments, starting with his strongest positions. Even more importantly, you cannot simply attack the individual thoughts; you must attack the infrastructure shoring up those positions. Paine attacked “...the most deeply embedded, yet subtly powerful of assumptions—the idea of George III as the father and the colonists as children within his extended family. Paine knew instinctively that this family romance had to be utterly exploded before the colonists could embrace the possibility of severing ties with the empire.” (Liell, 19)

Indeed, before *Common Sense*, “All our politics had been founded on the hope or expectation of making the matter up (Liell, 70).” Once the deepest assumptions had been shattered, Paine ruthlessly attacked each argument against independence. Arguing against Britain’s strength, he noted “It is not in the power of Britain or of Europe to

conquer America, if she do not conquer herself by delay and timidity.” (Liell, 176) Against repeated efforts to petition the King, Paine commented “...nothing flatters vanity, or confirms obstinacy in Kings more than repeated petitioning....” (Liell, 177)

Third, you must identify what you are fighting against. You must name your enemy; make it personal, thereby giving your people a physical enemy. Paine ridiculed the concept of hereditary rule, then the history of the British monarchy, and finally the person of King George III. Such an approach was unheard of; even Samuel Adams had not gone so far.

“The effect was sudden and startling. After the publication of *Common Sense*, talk of the “Ministerial Army” was replaced overnight with talk of the “King’s Troops.” The king’s arms were removed from their place of honor and publicly burnt by patriotic mobs. Outside Boston, George Washington ceased his habit of toasting the king at supper.” (Liell, 77)

Indeed, the effect of naming the king as the enemy was so successful in galvanizing support that, when writing the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson again followed the same tack. He too “...had shifted the burden of blame onto George III. He charged that “the history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations,” and proceeded to recite a litany of those injuries, 27 of them, all beginning with the same word: ‘He.’ This shift of public odium to the person of the king had the effect of obliterating the strongest remaining bond between America and Great Britain.” (Liell, 77)

In addition to identifying your opponent, you must also redefine those who, while not standing in active opposition, still work to oppose your interests. Paine categorized those who stood against independence into four categories, each worse than the preceding:

“Interested men, who are not to be trusted; weak men who cannot see; prejudiced men who will not see; and a certain set of moderate men, who think better

of the European world than it deserves; and this last class by an ill-judged deliberation, will be the cause of more calamities to this continent than the other three.” (Liell, 175)

Fourth, you must make it clear what you are fighting FOR. Paine argued that an independent country would enjoy greater security and economic opportunity. But these arguments were almost secondary. He made it clear that independence was being waged in order to establish a republic of, by, and for the people. The call for independence was not simply to replace British parliamentary rule with a homegrown facsimile—it was a call for a new political reality. Even more profound than the effect on the people was the argument’s effect on the Continental Army. Washington ordered the pamphlet read to his troops.

“... Common Sense offered him and his army two things they most desperately needed. By calling for them to oppose not “tyranny” but the “tyrant,” Paine gave them an actual enemy. By stating with fanatic certainty that the only acceptable outcome of the war was independence, he gave them a cause.” (Liell, 125)

Common Sense was a huge hit among the officers; even more so than among the men and civilians—they knew they needed a declaration to get external assistance; and they knew that reconciliation offered them nothing.

Fifth, you must create a sense of urgency. It is not enough to gain your audience’s agreement; they must feel compelled to act! Indeed, the cost of *not* acting must be made worse than any possible cost incurred in the present. Paine spoke to his audiences’ responsibility to later generations when he wrote:

“To those who granted all these points and yet counseled patience and restraint, Paine warned that they were shirking their duty and leaving the burden to their children. He

said that if it must come to war “for God’s sake, let us come to a final separation, and not leave the next generation to be cutting throats, under the violated unmeaning names of parent and child.” (Liell, 79)

Sixth, you must create a bigger sense of purpose. Paine argued for independence in order to achieve a republic; and he argued for a republic in order to save civilization. He wrote “we have it in our power to begin the world over again.” (Liell, 117) In words that rival an evangelist’s imagery and sense of mission, Paine wrote:

“Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom has been hunted round the globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger; and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.” (Liell, 81)

Relationship Between An IO Campaign and the Audience: Five Critical Elements

The second aspect of any IO campaign is relation to its audience. Our examination of *Common Sense* provides us with five elements that must be incorporated into any IO campaign. These ensure the message is received, takes root, and ultimately achieves the desired outcome.

The first element is to properly identify the target audience. They must be selected for the effect you intend to achieve—not just who you think will initially receive the message. Paine wrote “...a work of political philosophy written for those who didn’t read works of political philosophy.” He wrote to the American people. (Liell, 115) And accordingly, “The profound and widespread popular impact of *Common Sense* was pronounced and unprecedented, but it should not be viewed, at the end of the day, as a complete surprise. Thomas Paine

reached the largest audience ever by a political writer because he aimed at the largest audience ever.” (Liell, 114)

The second element is to pick the right medium for the message. This is a greater challenge today in the age of instant news—a headline today is forgotten tomorrow—than it was to Paine. The biggest consideration is that the medium must reflect the message. If you are trying to effect substantial, permanent, and important changes, it stands to reason that you need something that lends the air of substance, of permanence, of importance. *Common Sense* was published as a pamphlet; essentially several pages of newsprint bound together. It was more than a newspaper, less than a book. In that manner, it had the best of both—like a newspaper it was short and inexpensive, but like a book it was bound and more durable.

The third element is well known to every realtor: location, location, location! *Common Sense* was published in Philadelphia, at that time the largest, most cosmopolitan city in America—and the seat of the Continental Congress.

“...Because of the unique geographical, social, and political importance of Philadelphia, what might have remained merely a local phenomenon in any other American city was able to engage a truly national audience.” (Liell, 91)

The fourth element is voice. The message must ring out with a powerful, emotional appeal. This is no time for legalism and cold logic. Thomas Paine wrote with a “suppressed rage.” (Liell, 20) If your objective is for the target audience to take ownership of the message, then they must recognize the voice of the message as their own. The message speaks to and for them, because it says what they would say, given the opportunity. Paine was successful because he “...wrote in the language of the public house, (his contemporaries)... wrote in the language of the courthouse.” (Liell, 20)

You will know if you are successful when the target audience defends your message. *Common Sense* was also met by a “frantic volley of respondents, some attempting to support, but most to attack Paine and rebut his arguments.” (Liell, 84) The profound difference in this instance was that people did not simply sit back and observe the debate—they took ownership of the message and began to defend it from attack.

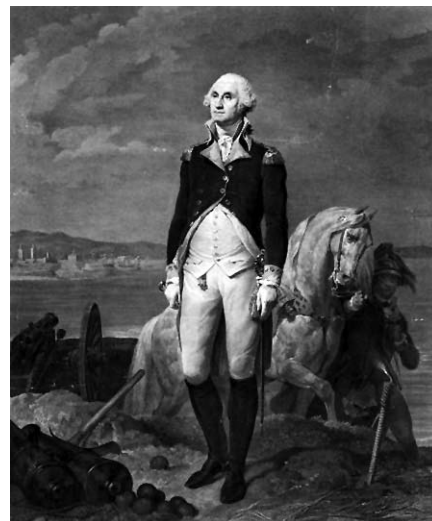
“A New Yorker wrote proudly: There has been a pamphlet written and publish’d here against our natural rights and Common Sense. It has met with its Demise. Some of our sturdy Sons seiz’d between 1500 and 2000 of them at Sam Loudon’s, and consigned them to the flames.” (Liell, 106)

In another instance, a pamphlet named *Plain Truth* was published. Although it was “...quickly dismissed by independents and Tories alike as vastly inadequate to the task of toppling *Common Sense*,” (Liell, 85) this assessment did not serve to prevent patriotic mobs from publicly burning it—and even destroying the print shops that dared print it. In fact, so dangerous was the outcry that the author never revealed himself.

The fifth element is empowerment. You must express confidence in people if you want them to do something. Paine “...demonstrated a fundamental confidence in the American people.” (Liell, 119) This was a far cry from the position of many of his supporters. Even John Adams “...had some reservations even then about some of Paine’s notions of the kind of government that would replace imperial rule, notions he felt were “too democratical.” (Liell, 103)

An IO Campaign to Establish Political Culture and Institutions: The Federalist Papers as a Template

The Federalist Papers are often considered a debater’s handbook because they were thought to reflect the very best political thought on debates of



*One of the first US IO strategists:
General Washington.
(US Library of Congress)*

ratification, and copies of each essay were very much in demand throughout the states. They can also be understood as four books in one: 1) an explanation of federal government—still a new concept; 2) an indictment of the Articles of Confederation—which provided little to no government; 3) a more precise analysis and defense of the new Constitution—which the authors desperately wanted to gain the people’s allegiance to; and finally, 4) as “an exposition of certain enduring truths that provide an understanding of both the dangers and the delights of free government.” (Rossiter, xii)

By design, all of the essays were published under the pseudonym of ‘Publius,’ a near-legendary figure drawn from the very historical beginnings of the Roman Republic. His name was chosen for its affiliation with a republican form of government. Notably, the actual authors were left unnamed, and two went to their deaths without receiving full credit for their contributions. In any event, it was the message, not the author, which was of greatest importance—a point we would do well to note today.

The Federalist Papers fought for, and achieved, primacy of three notions of government that we today hold as unquestioned values: “...federalism, social pluralism, and constitutionalism

(that is, divided, balanced, and limited government).” (Rossiter, xiv) The question is how did they do it? In simplest terms, the authors tackled each item, point by point. Their tone varied from that of the layman, colorfully expressing frustration and openly ridiculing those who dissent, to that of the lawyer, mercilessly dissecting even the finest point. And, they continued until the authors felt sure they had driven the point home.

The Constitution of the United States was ratified because of the will of the people, not the elites. The people were no more certain of their ability to effectively govern themselves than were many of the elite, but they demanded the opportunity to try. Ratification reflected the people’s belief that institutions established by the Constitution would in fact represent their ideals and values, and serve to protect and defend their interests. And the American people came to this conclusion in no small part due to the arguments laid out in *The Federalist Papers*.

Conclusion

The United States is waging a war against one political reality—of ideas and ideology. Such a war is about the legitimacy of political, social, and economic systems. Legitimacy is conferred, first and foremost, in the minds of the people. If so, where is the corresponding effort? In all our efforts to build the capacity and capability of the Afghan and Iraqi governments, are we also fighting equally hard to convince the people of the legitimacy of our efforts? Could it be that we are defaulting this fight to the Afghan and Iraqi governments, on the pretext that it is their people, their government, their culture? If so, have we acknowledged, even to ourselves, that we have ceded responsibility for the main effort to someone else? Could it be that, confused by the ambiguity and complexity of our own definitions, we fail to see that Information Operations is the right weapon system for this fight?

As I have sought to demonstrate in this essay, IO is all about ideas. But the

US military, focused as it is on weapon systems, sees Information Operations primarily as a means of protecting its investments. In effect, when it comes to IO, the US military is not playing to win; it is playing to NOT lose. This is most unfortunate, because we have in effect ignored the role information operations campaigns had in shaping our own political reality—especially in the critical years between 1775-1788.

I believe Information Operations, as currently understood, are about many little ideas. But success will only come when we prioritize our efforts and focus on *ONE BIG IDEA*. And the one big idea the US military must contend with is how to respond to the core challenge facing the US: how to create both the institutions and political culture for a functioning and sustainable liberal democracy. Information Operations, properly targeted and resourced, is the weapon system of choice for this challenge.

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Notes

¹ Quote taken from *46 Pages, Thomas Paine, Common Sense, and the Turning Point to Independence*, by Scott Liell, MJF Books, New York, NY, 2003, page 119

² The term ‘liberal democracy’ is traditionally defined as a government that enshrines the rule of law (liberal), and whose decision-makers are truly representative of the people (democracy)

³ The five disciplines that form the core of Information Operations are electronic warfare (EW), computer network operations (CNO), psychological operations (PSYOP), military deception (MILDEC), and operations security (OPSEC)

⁴ Joint Publication 3-13, *Information Operations*, dated 13 February 2006 